

...that hundreds of prisoners of conscience remain in Iranian prisons even as the country went to the polls last week to elect a new President?

Last month, the UK-based Guardian newspaper launched on [online database](#) that identified some 2,500 prisoners of conscience who either are languishing in Iranian jails or awaiting a call from authorities to serve out their convictions with prison terms. Among the hundreds of prisoners of conscience are religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Sufis, Zoroastrians, Sunnis, and majority Shi'a clerics and dissidents.

Over the past few years, the Iranian government has imposed harsh prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shi'a majority community for simply exercising their internationally-protected rights of freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. Many have been tried on criminal charges of "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards. Several of the country's ethnic minorities — Arabs, Baluchis, Kurds, and Turkmen — practice Sunni Islam. Members of these groups are subject to discriminatory policies based on both their ethnic identity and their faith. Intelligence and security services regularly intimidate and harass Sunni Muslim leaders who report widespread official discrimination in government employment, particularly in leadership positions in the executive and judicial branches, and do not have a mosque in Tehran. During the past year, an increased number of Sufi Muslims have been arrested and harassed. Sufi Muslims — who come from the Shi'a Muslim tradition — face government repression of their communities and religious practices, including harassment and imprisonment of their prominent leaders and the destruction of prayer centers and *hussainiyas* (places of worship).

While the constitution of Iran formally recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as

protected religious minorities who may worship freely and have autonomy over personal status matters, the government's laws and institutions adversely affects their rights and status and they live, in effect, as second class citizens. Members of these groups are subject to legal and other forms of discrimination, particularly in education, government jobs and services, and the armed services. Iranian authorities continue to raid church services, harass and threaten church members, and arrest, convict, and imprison worshippers and church leaders. Evangelical and other Protestants are subject to harassment, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment. Christian converts face severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution for apostasy and extrajudicial killings. In recent years, members of the Zoroastrian community — numbering between 30,000 and 35,000 people — have come under increasing repression and discrimination and a handful are serving prison terms for propaganda of the Zoroastrian faith.

The Baha'i community has long been subject to particularly severe religious freedom violations. According to Iranian law, Baha'i blood is *mobah*, which means members of the Baha'i faith can be killed with impunity. Iranian authorities view Baha'is, who number at least 300,000, as "heretics," and repress them for "apostasy" and other baseless charges. Since 1979, the government has killed more than 200 Baha'i leaders and dismissed more than 10,000 from government and university jobs. More than 100 Baha'is remain in Iranian prisons because of their faith.

For more details, see USCIRF's most recent annual report chapter on Iran: <http://www.uscifr.gov/images/Iran%202013.pdf>